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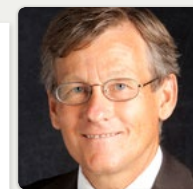
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Old Testament principles *relevant to* consensual homoerotic activity —Part 3 of 3

This, the third part of a three-part study, identifies principles in the Old Testament relevant to the relationship between God's community of faith and individuals who engage in some forms of sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage. My primary focus is on mutually consensual homoerotic activity as practiced by people within the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) spectrum.

What the Old Testament does not say

There are some subtopics of homoerotic activity or related topics that the Old Testament does not address. First, the Old Testament does not refer, even in a descriptive narrative, to same-sex marriage or any equivalent to it, such as exclusive, committed, same-sex cohabitation. Does this mean that such an arrangement, outside the scope of possibilities covered by the Old Testament, is therefore permissible for Christians? Such a conclusion would overlook the comprehensive nature of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which categorically forbids homosexual practice without any exceptions. If

marriage is a relationship that includes sexual relations, and if God prohibits sexual relations between members of the same gender, no room exists for discussion of the possible legitimacy of same-sex marriage, at least according to God.

Second, the Old Testament does not explicitly refer to female same-sex (lesbian) activity.¹ Later, during New Testament times in the Greco-Roman world, Paul explicitly addressed lesbian sex (Rom. 1:26, 27).

Third, the Old Testament does not contain a requirement for everyone to marry. In divine law regarding Israelites in general, remaining single was not a moral fault or impediment to fulfilling a position of leadership.

Fourth, the Old Testament does not distinguish between same-sex orientation and behavior, in the sense of specifying a person's inherent sexual attraction to other individuals of the same gender, whether or not he or she acts upon this tendency. The only concern is the homosexual activity itself, regardless of orientation, with the assumption that voluntary actions reflect desires. However, this does not mean that the Old Testament is ignorant of the distinction between

sexual desire and corresponding action. Some passages describe steps in a process that begins with sexual desire and climaxes with action (e.g., 2 Sam. 11, 13; cf. Song of Solomon). The movement from desire to action is not inevitable but can be interrupted by choice, including firm moral resolve (Job 31:1—"I have made a covenant with my eyes . . .").

Although some Old Testament laws regulate attitudes (Exod. 20:17; Lev. 19:17, 18) for which one is accountable to God, there is not a word against a person with same-sex tendencies who does not act on them. By itself, experiencing temptation is never a sin.² An individual attracted to the same gender, who did not act upon that attraction, would be entitled to full protection under Israelite law, including laws against murder and assault (Lev. 24:17, 19, 20), and there is no legal reason that he or she should be subjected to stigma or barred from exercising leadership.

The fact that the Old Testament perspective did not separate sexual and romantic orientation from behavior, as does modern science, should not be taken to signal the obsolescence of biblical principles. The Creator has

always known more about human beings than science ever will, no matter how modern or sophisticated (cf. Ps. 139). He was the one who gave the biblical laws, and He did not see fit to make legal distinctions that take orientation into account. Instead, He drew the line at the level of actual same-sex activity. By doing so, He avoided laying an additional burden on a faithful person who struggles with same-sex orientation but does not act on it.

orientation, even when this is disharmonious with reproductive organs. Orientation that science shows to be inherent is viewed as natural, and therefore, acting on it is viewed as morally right.

Sixth, again out of harmony with modern culture, the Bible indicates nowhere that emotional and/or sexual fulfillment is an inalienable right. The fact that God provided Eve as an archetypal “helper fit for” Adam (Gen. 2:18) does not mean that everyone is

bounds of biblical marriage, which is permanently defined as a relationship between a man and a woman, according to the physical nature of their complementary sexual organs. Obviously, definitions are crucial here, so it is not surprising that much of the current debate revolves around these definitions.

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Many people today, especially young people, are watching the church to see whether it will demonstrate the sensitivity, compassion, and consistency of Christ.

Fifth, the Old Testament never identifies genders apart from reproductive organs, including external genitalia and internal organs.³ There are only male and female, without reference to exceptional varieties of crossover or in-between categories. In the Bible, only biological organs determine whether one is male or female and permitted to engage in corresponding activity with the opposite sex within marriage. This accords with the natural complementarity between the form and function of the male and female reproductive organs, which are clearly made for each other. This complementarity is a permanent physiological fact.

Contemporary culture challenges the definition of genders based exclusively on physical form, insisting that other factors count too. Modern people insist on emotional fulfillment in accord with sexual and romantic

entitled to a “helper fit for” them, in the sense of fitting their sexual orientation, even if it is same-sex orientation. Even though the struggles and challenges can seem unsurmountable at times, what really matters in this life is not emotional and sexual fulfillment, but faithfulness to God. Some biblical characters who were closest to God and most faithful to Him enjoyed little emotional satisfaction and, in some cases, no sexual fulfillment.⁴ God’s people may be lonely and unfulfilled during the present age, but they live by faith that He will give them a better eternal life (Heb. 11).

Application to the community of faith

The Old Testament evidence is consistent regarding homoerotic activity: God does not allow or condone it, even if mutually consensual, because it is outside the

and consistency of Christ. Many have difficulty accepting that a good and just Creator would condemn people for expressing their sexuality in harmony with the way that He has created them. Prompted by contemporary culture, including “political correctness,” they argue that marriage should be an equal opportunity institution, also open to those whose inherent sexual attraction is to the same gender. This kind of theodicy argument misses the fact that our problems are not caused by God, but by the corporate fallout of human rebellion against Him, which does not affect everyone equally. God is fair, but life is not, because it is under the shadow of the great controversy between good and evil.

Like ancient Israel, our church is responsible for cooperating with God’s saving work in the world through our faithfulness to His principles, which are

in harmony with His just and merciful character (Exod. 34:6, 7), and for our positive influence on others, especially by our example. While our faith community can seek to influence society through appropriate channels, it is not responsible for policing the morality of outsiders or forcing them to conform to its standards.⁵

In a secular state, “legal” and “right in God’s sight” are two different things, based on different authorities. “Legal” is based on human reasoning, which can involve social “political correctness.” On the other hand, “right in God’s sight” is communicated by the plain sense of the Bible, properly understood according to its own guidelines for interpreting it. Christians should be careful not to imbibe the secular worldview by making “political correctness” their moral authority in place of the Bible, but should treat all people with respect and comply with secular laws insofar as they do not conflict with divine principles (Acts 5:27–29; Rom. 13:1–7).

Although emotional fulfillment is not guaranteed for the followers of God in this life, Isaiah conveyed special encouragement for loyal members of God’s family who were not able to enjoy married family life: “For thus says the LORD: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off’ ” (Isa. 56:4, 5, ESV).

In harmony with His character and treatment of human beings (Deut. 10:17–19), God commanded His Old Testament people to love their neighbors and resident aliens as themselves (Lev. 19:18, 34) and also to protect, care for, and include those who were socially disadvantaged (Exod. 22:21–24; Lev. 19:9, 10; Deut. 10:18, 19; 16:11, 14; 24:19–21, etc.). Similarly, the Christian community is responsible for seeking to ease the burdens of those within and around

it. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2, ESV).

For a person who wants to follow the Lord, few burdens are as heavy as inherent same-sex orientation in a cultural environment of emotional and sexual entitlement.⁶ The basic longing for a partner is powerful because it has a God-given origin and was natural in the beginning (Gen. 2:18–20). The Fall did not remove this hardwired sense of need but has bent it in a same-sex direction that was not intended by the Creator.⁷ If LGBTQ people did not feel the need for companionship, celibacy would be relatively easy. But they do feel it, so celibacy is a struggle. Compounding the difficulty, society now accepts some alternative partnership directions as natural and therefore right, which puts even greater pressure on an LGBTQ individual to overlook divine disapproval in pursuit of perceived fulfillment.

Full commitment to God is especially hard for those who have already experienced homosexual activity. Nevertheless, the Lord calls them to forsake their way and thoughts (although their inherent orientation may not change) and receive His compassion and abundant, transforming forgiveness (Isa. 55:7; cf. Ps. 51; 1 Cor. 6:9–11). He says that His commands are not impossible to keep (Deut. 30:11–14) because He provides a way of escape from temptation (1 Cor. 10:13) and is able to keep people from falling (Jude 24).

Church members are responsible for working with God to help provide ways of escape through acceptable social alternatives that are deeper and more frequent than casual encounters at church potlucks. In this way, such members can fulfill the law of Christ by sensitively and respectfully assisting the journeys of LGBTQ people as they seek to walk with Him, rather than being overcome by temptation, alienation, or despair that often leads to suicide. By welcoming and interacting with them, hearing their stories, and receiving the benefits of their talents, God’s community will be enriched,

strengthened, and blessed (cf. Isa. 58:6–12).

To help LGBTQ persons, Christians need to overcome some barriers: (1) The assumption that they are necessarily LGBTQ by choice, (2) the assumption that any LGBTQ person can become heterosexual, (3) the assumption that all LGBTQ individuals are sexually active or even promiscuous, and (4) disgust and fear of some kind of “contamination” from those who are regarded as engaging in an abomination.

Perhaps at least part of the reason why some LGBTQ people report failure to overcome same-sex activity, in spite of repeated attempts at victory through sincere and agonizing prayer, is because of lack of support from the faith community, who often prefer to maintain a safe distance, even if they do not reject or even ignore them. Such distance can reflect lack of faith in Christ’s ability to preserve the purity and holiness of His followers while they serve as representatives of His transforming ministry in a broken world (Matt. 28:19, 20; John 17:15–19).

Jesus has shown us the way. Mary Magdalene was not immune from danger of relapse after He delivered her from demonic possession (cf. Matt. 12:43–45). Yet He adopted her into His circle of friends (Luke 8:2) and was honored when she anointed Him (John 12:3–8; cf. Matt. 26:6–13; Luke 7:37–50). Similarly, the ancient Israelites adopted Rahab, the recent prostitute and new believer in the true God (Josh. 6:25; cf. chap. 2), who was honored by becoming one of Christ’s ancestors (Matt. 1:5). If Jesus and the ancient honor-shame society of Israel, which was under direct theocratic rule, could show such acceptance of people with problematic pasts who wanted to follow the Lord, there is no reason for God’s modern people not to go and do likewise.

Conclusion

This study has identified an Old Testament principle regarding sexuality that is nonnegotiable for a

Christian church that claims to follow all of Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16, 17): God sanctions sexual activity only when it takes place within marriage between a man and a woman. However, there is another nonnegotiable Old Testament principle that is just as relevant to our treatment of LGBTQ people: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; cf. v. 34).⁸ The topic of this discussion is not merely their issue, but our issue. If they are being tested, so are we, and it appears that we have plenty of room for improvement. May God help us balance our application of His principles in accordance with His love, which includes both justice and mercy!⁹ 📖

1 Contrast the prohibition of male homosexual activity in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 with 18:23 and

20:15, 16, which prohibit female as well as male humans from engaging in bestiality. However, Richard M. Davidson argues that “the prohibition of lesbian relationships is probably implicit in the general Levitical injunction against following the abominable practices of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, as recognized in rabbinic interpretation” (*Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007], 150). He suggests “that the reason that both man and woman are mentioned only with regard to bestiality in Lev 18 and 20 may simply be because in the case of bestiality the gender-inclusive masculine language does not include the animals and thus is not implicitly reversible (applicable to the other gender) in describing human-animal relations like it is with sexual relationships involving only humans” (150, n. 75).

2 But lustful intent is sin (Rom. 1:27; cf. Matt. 5:28).

3 E.g., Deuteronomy 23:1 (in the Hebrew it is v. 2)—male testicles and penis; Genesis 20:18—womb/uterus. The term for female, *negebah*, refers to the vagina.

4 For example, Jeremiah and Jesus never married, and they suffered alienation and profound sorrow.

5 At certain times, God did commission ancient Israel as His instrument to execute corporate capital punishment on groups of people who were chronic violators of basic morality (e.g., Deut. 7:1–5, 16, 24–26; 20:16–18; Josh. 7; cf. Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004], 771–73). However, this was divine retribution under theocratic control, not exercise of inherent responsibility by the community of God’s people. The present faith community is comprised of a Christian church rather than a theocratic state, so maintenance of our boundaries is restricted to noncorporate measures, of which expulsion from fellowship comes as the most extreme (cf. 1 Cor. 5).

6 Single life for anyone, whether “straight” or LGBTQ, is not just about abstinence from sex. It involves lack of constant, intimate companionship with fulfillment of intense, intimate love and loyalty.

7 Evelyn Tollerton, personal communication.

8 This principle is reiterated numerous times in the New Testament, e.g., Matthew 22:39; John 13:34; 15:12; Romans 13:8–10; Galatians 5:14; 1 John 4:20.

9 Cf. Psalm 85:10 (in the Hebrew it is v. 11).

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